

Disintegration of the Imperial Chola Empire

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The scope of this article is to explore the sequence of events which led to the disintegration of the Imperial Chola Empire in the 13th Century A.D. The general notion is the empire was strong and intact till the reign of Kulothunga Chola III (1178 – 1218 A.D.) and only from the time of Raja Raja Chola III (1216 – 1249 A.D.), the empire started disintegrating. Facts are that the seeds of disintegration were planted much earlier during the reign of Kulothunga Chola I (1070 – 1120 A.D.) itself. During the reign of Rajendra Chola I (1012 – 1044 A.D.), the Great, the empire reached was in peak comprising overseas territories like Sri Lanka, Maldives and other island territories. The Chola provincial governors were in place in at least 14 locations including modern day Kannauj.

Let us see the sequence of events in the reign of Kulothunga Chola I, which started the collapse of the empire.

First collapse of the empire happened with the freedom of Sri Lanka around 1077 A.D. The Chola provincial governor titled Chola Lankeswara's last inscription was found in the year 1077 A.D. after which Sinhalese king regained independence from the empire.

Meanwhile, the Hoysala kingdom started expanding to become an empire at the cost of the Chola Empire. Hoysala king Vishnuvardhana was able to capture the Gangapadi and Nolambapadi regions from the Chola Empire and it was lost permanently by the Chola Empire.

The Chola provincial governor in the city of Madurai titled Chola Pandyan was driven out of the kingdom and the Pandyas recaptured Madurai. Kulothunga Chola I failed to evict the Pandyas from Madurai and allowed the Pandyas to rule the kingdom by paying annual tributes to the emperor. This allowed the Pandyas to consolidate themselves and to provide fatal blow to the Chola empire during the reign of Raja Raja Chola III.

The Chola provincial governor in the Chera Kingdom was titled Chola Keralan was also driven out of

the Chera kingdom and they were replaced with the Chera dynasty similar to the Pandya country. Though Cheras and Pandyas paid annual tributes to the Chola Emperor, they practically become independent and able to consolidate their position.

Vengi Nadu (Country of Vengi) was ruled by the Chola provincial governors. The Chola princes were appointed as the Chola provincial governors. The last governor was Vikrama Chola, son of Kulothunga Chola I, who was called back to be appointed as the crown prince of the Chola Empire in the year 1118 A.D. With his departure, Vengi was also lost from the empire. Kalingathu Bharani written by Jayamkondar praises the victory of Kulothunga Chola I over the ruler of the Kalingam. This expedition was taken as the ruler of Kalinga failed to provide the annual tributes. This is another indication that vassal states at the far away location openly started revolting against the central authority of the Chola Empire. None of his successors took any steps to recover the lost territories. At the end of Kulothunga Chola I's reign, one-third of the territories like Sri Lanka, Vengi, Gangapadi and Kolar was lost, one-third of the territories like the

Pandya and the Chera kingdoms become practically independent and remaining alone were under the writ of the Chola Emperor.

Kulothunga Chola I's long reign of 50 years was also another reason for the decline of the Chola Empire. If we look back at the history of the Imperial Cholas, the lengthy reign of one Chola Emperor is followed by short and quick successions of the Chola Emperors thereby weakening the empire. The best example is the reign of Parantaka Chola I (903 – 955 A.D.). His long reign of more than 50 years witnessed rapid expansion of the Chola Empire and during the last years of his reign, the Chola Empire was reduced to the Chola Kingdom after the battle of Takkolam. It took another 40 years for the restoration of the Chola Empire. Similarly, after the long reign of Kulothunga Chola I for 50 years, the Chola Emperors like Vikrama Chola, Kulothunga Chola II and Rajadhi Raja Chola II did not complete even years 20 years as Emperor. The short reign of around 15 years resulted in the vassal states getting more autonomous and the central authority of the Chola Empire weakened as a whole. For example, during the internal strife between

Vikrama Pandya and Parakrama Pandya in the Pandya Kingdom, the Chola army crowned Vikrama Pandya as the ruler of Madurai. But he rebels against the Chola Emperor and joins hands with the Sinhalese ruler during the reign of Rajadhi Raja Chola II. The mighty army of the Chola Empire suffered major setbacks at the hands of the combined rebel army of the Pandyas and Sinhala rulers. As per the Pallavarayanpettai inscription, the rebel armies reached deep inside the Chola Kingdom itself and they were finally defeated by the Chola army. This is a clear cut indication of the failure of the authority of the Chola Emperor.

Another example is during the last days of Raja Raja Chola II, crown prince could not be selected to succeed the empire. His children were aged 2 and 1 years respectively at that time and they have to be secretly moved out of the capital Gangaikondacholapuram in order to protect the children of the Chola Empire! No able Chola prince was found in the capital and Edhirili Chola Perumal, a descendant of the Vikrama Chola ruling in the northern most region of Andhra has to be crowned as the next emperor.

Repeated natural calamities like drought and floods during the reign of Raja Raja Chola II and Rajadhi Raja Chola II weakened the prosperity and financial strength of the Chola Empire.

After the short reign of the above Emperors, the reign of Kulothunga Chola III (1178 – 1218 A.D.) was a long reign of 40 years. He undertook three expeditions against the Pandyas of Madurai for failing to pay the annual tributes to the Chola Emperor and he was successful in his expeditions. He took expeditions as far as Nellore in Andhra Pradesh and he was successful. He tried to restore the Chola Empire to its original status but he failed to address the above structural issues we have discussed. During the reign of Kulothunga Chola III, the vassals of the Chola Empire entered into agreements with each other and against each other openly flouting the central authority of the empire. This was another indication that empire is disintegrating rapidly. Either Kulothunga Chola III failed to groom the next generation of the Chola clan or the groomed princes pre-deceased him. For nearly 100 years, the central authority of the Chola Empire was weakened

gradually and it was exposed during the reign of Raja Raja Chola III. When he was defeated and driven out of the Chola Kingdom by the Pandyas, none of the Chola vassal states helped him. On the contrary, he was taken as a prisoner by the former vassal Kadavaraya Chief Kopperunjina II at Senthamangalam when he was on his way to get help from the Hoysala emperor. He has to be liberated by the army of the Hoysalas and re-crowned as the Chola King. Such was the pathetic situation the Chola Kings reached during the reign of Raja Raja Chola III. It is an irony that Chola Kingdom became a major empire during the time of Raja Raja Chola I, the Great and it got disintegrated during Raja Raja Chola III! Though Rajendra Chola III (1246 – 1279 A.D.) was initially successful in subjugating the Pandyas, because of the above structural issues, he lost the plot and the Cholas disappeared into history.

References:

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